

baby killer

and other stories

"Oh, *beautiful*." The car slowed and he looked up from what he was reading. Traffic had stopped up ahead, and people were in the street. Protesters, from the look of it. "*Just* what we need," continued the major, who was driving. They both looked behind them, to see if they could get back to the last side street, but cars had blocked them in. They were going to have to wait it out.

It didn't look like an organized street demonstration; probably a protest at the civic center had spilled out onto the main thoroughfare. He noticed the usual signs: "No Blood For Oil!"; "No War In Iraq!" That one seemed a little out of date. There *was* war in Iraq. It was mostly over now, actually—he'd just come from there. And while "no blood for oil" was catchy, oil meant money, and because it was such a limited and necessary resource, oil meant power. And people had always traded blood for money and power. Other signs focused on the occupation forces moving into Iraq. One had "Liberate Iraq" in big block letters, then below it said, "from US!" Which could be read "U.S." or "us." Clever. A similar one demanded, "Get US Out Now!" In a way, he agreed. He'd be happy to see all our troops come home. But it wouldn't be right to just leave that country in the mess it was in, and the U.S. certainly wasn't going to just pull out now. It was a terrible mess over there. He was glad to be out of it, though he wished the circumstances were different.

"Here they come, Captain." But he already saw what the major saw. Now that they had stopped traffic, the protesters were getting bolder and had started spreading out among the cars. They were moving this way. And there they sat, two army

officers in their dress greens. This wasn't going to be pleasant. But he had faced worse than a crowd of protesters before, hadn't he?

Someone noticed them and shouted, "Hey! Some Army guys!" That drew the attention of others, and he felt their stares. But he didn't stare back and the protesters kept moving and chanting. A few seemed to pause and direct their chants directly at his window, but no one touched the car and they didn't appear to be violent or even very angry. Until the hippie. She looked like she was about fifty, with lots of gray in her ponytail. He wouldn't have been surprised if she had been protesting nonstop since Vietnam. Now she was right up at the window, so close she was probably steaming up the glass. "Look what we got here! Some brass! When you gonna bring our boys home?" He didn't look at her, though that only seemed to provoke her more. "You got *blood* on your hands, y'know. *Lots* of it. Women and babies are dying over there. Do you know how many Iraqi *babies* you've killed—*Captain?*" Now he turned and looked at her. She stopped shouting and he stared straight into her angry face. He held up three fingers.

The firefight had not been an especially bad one. None of his guys had been killed or wounded. And the Iraqis had fallen back and disengaged pretty quickly. But someone reported a small explosion on that street the next morning, and soon afterwards an Iraqi had brought a child to one of his guys on patrol. Apparently some kids had found a grenade and it had gone off. Two of the children were killed instantly; the third was in the man's arms. Medics were called, but they asked a lot of questions since they weren't supposed to treat Iraqi injuries that weren't inflicted by U.S. troops, unless the injuries were life threatening. When they did arrive, after almost an hour, it was too late. The soldier who told him about the incident was crying before the end of the story. It was the helplessness. He

felt it too. All this power, but it kept destroying the ones they were trying to save. He suspected it was a U.S. grenade the kids had found. Thrown in an engagement he had ordered. Now his "collateral damage" included three children.

The hippie woman looked confused. He saw the word 'three' on her lips, but couldn't hear it. But others had seen his response and were shouting now. That's when the traffic slowly started moving. There were more angry shouts, but the woman didn't try to stay with them, and as her face disappeared from view he looked ahead to where the police were clearing the street. Then something slammed against the back of the car. Both men jumped, and the major hit the brakes. "Dammit!" They looked back. It was a sign. Someone had thrown a sign. It was still laying against the rear window: "Only COWARDS Need Guns," with 'cowards' in huge block letters. Obviously that protester hadn't been to Iraq.

They got moving again and he looked back at what he was reading. He was trying to find one particular part. Here... *"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable...."* Wait, that's not it.

"I don't think we'll have time now to stop for lunch," said the major. "I wanted to let you get something to eat before we get there. I hear the food's not so great in there, and it's probably going to be a long ordeal processing you in."

"That's OK, I'm not hungry," he replied. "But thanks."

"I've never done an escort like this before," the major went on, "I guess they don't want the MPs dealing with officers. We only have a few minutes before we get there... you want to tell me what you did?"

He thought for a moment. Then looked over at the major.

"I stopped giving orders."

Then it was quiet and they slowed as they approached the main gate. A young MP came to attention and saluted the car, and the major returned the salute as they moved through the tall fences. He noticed the razor wire coiling along the top. Nasty stuff.

He looked down again. Here it is: *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."*

When they got to the brig, he was surprised at how small and ordinary it looked. They got out of the car.

the value of a dollar

She glanced in the mirror. Not terrible. She looked older than she was, and her dress wasn't in the best shape, but she was still a young woman and with the hat you couldn't tell she needed a haircut. The neighbors had agreed to watch the kids for a couple hours tonight, if she watched their kids Saturday night. So she was ready to go. To church. She couldn't quite believe it, but there it was.

Her hand was on the doorknob when she remembered the collection. They take up a collection at church—how could she forget that? They always seemed to make such a big deal about it at the churches she went to growing up. Lots of lofty blessings on the cash. And one place even made a parade out of it. Everyone, even the kids, would get up and march single file up to the altar, which had a basket on it and one of the elders standing next to it. They would walk by and drop in their money—while the man watched and nodded solemnly—and then parade back to their seats. One Sunday, when she was a teenager, she had refused to join the parade. She just sat there with her arms crossed. Her mother had been so embarrassed that she slapped her when they got home. She never went to church again after that.

She looked in her wallet, though she knew what she'd find there. Just one dollar and some change. Well, she wasn't going to put change in, that's for sure. The clink of the coins in the offering plate would be too embarrassing. *She* knew she was poor, but she didn't need them knowing it. So she grabbed the dollar and stuffed it in her pocket. A dollar wouldn't buy dinner for tomorrow night anyway—she still didn't know what she was going to do about that. She didn't get paid until Friday; maybe she could stretch the left-overs? And if they had to go

hungry one night, that wasn't the end of the world—she'd done it enough times when she was a kid. She immediately hated herself for that thought, but that was the world she lived in.

When she got to the church, Linda wasn't there. Of course. Linda had been bugging her about this for weeks, and now when she shows up, no Linda. But the people seemed nice enough, and she hadn't come for Linda, really, had she? She'd been shrugging off people like Linda for years, no problem. It was the bills she couldn't shrug off any more. And the rumors about layoffs. And the horror stories she heard about the welfare offices. That's what dragged her into a church again, not Linda.

It was a small church, and the service wasn't much, compared to what she'd seen before. Just a few in the choir and some simple songs, but the people sang like they meant it. She recognized one she had liked as a child:

Seek ye first the kingdom of God,
and his righteousness,
and all these things shall be added unto you,
allelu, alleluia.

She liked the "allelu": al-layay-loo. She could remember her mother singing it that way.

Then the preacher got up there, but he kept it pretty short and simple. And there was no collection right afterwards like she was expecting. At a lot of churches she'd been to, the preacher would shout and dance around and get everyone worked up, and then they would pass the plate right away. Like they were saying, "You got your show—wasn't that something? Now what was that worth to you?" Just like everywhere else: people always wanted something from you. But who was she to talk?

They prayed, sang some more, then a few announcements

and that was it. And the announcements weren't what she was used to either. Usually pastors talked about all the great community services their church offered, or how they just bought new hymnals, or what they were doing to fix up the church. Which always sounded like they were trying to convince the people that their money was being put to good use. It reminded her of those road signs by the construction sites: "Your tax dollars at work." And the pastors always moved right on to "...but to keep up this great work, we need your full support." And everyone knew what that meant. Whether it was the pastors that said it or the politicians.

People were getting their coats on. She turned to the older lady next to her. "There's no collection tonight?"

"No, dear, we don't do that here. And somehow God finds a way to give us what we need anyway... not that we need much, you know." The lady smiled, and put out her hand. "I don't think we've met. I'm Betty. Do you live around here?" She told the lady her name and that she lived in the Monroe building. "Ah! So do I. You'll have to come over some time. I'm not going right home now, but how about tomorrow? For dinner maybe?" Betty didn't even mind that she had kids. "Please, bring 'em along! I could use a few little ones around my place again. Number 107. Six o'clock OK?"

She was stunned. She managed to nod, though, and smile a little, then watched as Betty walked slowly away. But she couldn't move. Something felt like it was coming loose inside of her, and she was afraid that if she moved she would fall apart. "*And somehow God finds a way to give us what we need anyway...*" She didn't know if she could believe that—but she wanted to. *Lord*, she wanted to...

She realized she was crying. But still she didn't move, letting the tears fall to the floor. When her nose started running she searched her pockets, but only found a crumpled... She laughed. And blew a dollar's worth.

He tried to ease it onto the sidewalk, but the dolly clanked loudly and scraped as it hit the concrete. Then he pushed it out into the flow of pedestrians. They stared at the bent figure, in a shabby trench coat and stocking cap pulled down over his gray hair, pushing a small, shiny safe in front of him. There was a heavy clunk at every break in the pavement. People would look at him for several seconds, sometimes having to look again, and some even made comments to each other:

"I gotta get me one of those." "Not *me*—all my shit is protected by my boys: *Smith* and *Wesson*..."

"That reminds me, Susan, I need to stop at the bank. I'll meet you back at the office." "Do you have to do that now?" "Yes, there's a slight *problem*..."

He did fine when the curbs were ramped, but some weren't, and the safe fell over once when he was trying to lower it into the street. He slowly bent over and with an effort set it upright. He struggled even more getting it up the opposite curb.

"Harold, help that old man." "*Marge*, anyone who wants a safe that bad *deserves* to lift it. Watch where you're going..."

"Y'know, for all we know, that geezer could be stealing that thing.... hey, did you get the renter's insurance?" "Nah. Too much." "Aw *man*, it's *worth* it. It covers *everything*..."

The safe was moving again. Clunk... clunk... clunk, on the

cracks in the sidewalk. People looking as they flowed past him. On the next block a well-dressed man was speaking passionately into a small bullhorn, reading from a book. Now people stared at that man instead of him.

"...and *thy Father*, who seeth *in secret*, shall recompense thee. Lay *not* up for yourselves treasures upon *the earth*, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures *in heaven*, where *neither* moth *nor* rust doth consume, and where thieves do *not* break through nor steal. For where your *treasure* is..."

"My treasure is right *here*, brother! Check it out... Twenty-four K! Ain't no rust consumin' *this*!"

He got the dolly through the door of the building and let it slam. Pulled the knob to make sure the door had latched and locked. Then he looked up the stairs.

He stepped up one, then another. On the next step he pulled, failed, then pulled again and the safe rose. Thud! One. He stepped up. *Pulled*—trembling a little—and... thud! Two. He was breathing hard. Holding the dolly, he sat down slowly. With his other hand he took off his stocking cap and carefully pushed it into his pocket. He sat that way for several minutes. Then took a deep breath and pulled himself up...

At the top of the stairs, he started towards his door. His legs were shaky. Slowly the safe moved down the dark hallway. It took several minutes for him to find the key to his apartment, and his neighbor stuck her head out and peered at him. "Whatcha got there? That a fridge? Thatsa *safe*! Whatcha need *that* for? Whatchu got to put *in* there..." Then his door closed behind him and the bolt slid with a click.

In the center of the living room there was a sturdy wooden table. He pushed the dolly up to the table and set the safe on the floor. He stared at it. Then with incredible determination, he grabbed the steel cube and lifted it, almost lost his balance, took a step back, then pushed it onto the table. He stood there a minute to catch his breath. Then he spun the dial several times and pulled the handle. The thick door swung wide open. Stepping over to the couch, he selected a small pillow, and put it firmly in the bottom of the safe. Then, with more energy, he pulled a chair up to the table. And sat down quickly. He scooted himself closer. Then he leaned forward, crossed his arms on the table, and put his head into the safe.

And sighed. He was smiling.

sovereign

She arrived for work a half hour before the bank closed, as usual, but she was nervous. Friday they had told her that she might have to leave. She didn't want to. Cleaning the bank was easy, and it was air-conditioned, and the people there dressed nice and smiled. And after they locked the doors, the tellers relaxed and talked and laughed while they counted the money. She liked that. It was nicer here than where she lived, even. All weekend she had worried about having to leave the bank: Had she done something wrong? If she did better could she stay? Thinking like that made her nervous.

But she knew how to act normal. They'd put her in the nut house because she was so nervous—only they called it "psychiatric hospital." Then she'd learned how to act normal: Not-nervous. So they let her out of the nut house and gave her a room in a regular house, where some other not-nervous women were living too. They also gave her a job cleaning the bank. There she was glad she could act normal, because it was a nice place.

The bank was called Sovereign Bank. She didn't know what that meant so she'd asked someone, and was told that sovereign meant king. The bank sign had lots of gold on it. One big, gold eye with gold lines coming from it like sun beams, and "Sovereign Bank" in gold too. Gold like a king.

That had made her curious. If this was a king's bank, she wondered who the king was. Probably not a real king—this was *America*—but it had to be someone very important, to be in charge of a big bank like this. The tellers were the easiest to talk to, but she already knew they weren't in charge. Their boss was Mr. Murphy. He had an office for himself, with a shiny sign that said his name and "Branch Operations." She picked

up the trash from his office every day. There were more offices too, upstairs, but she didn't work up there. So she'd decided to ask Mr. Murphy.

"Well, there's the president of this branch—Ms. Kennedy—but then there's lots of branches, with regional administration over them. Overall, the highest position is the CEO, who's also the chairman of the board of directors. The board runs the bank. But of course *they* routinely have to answer to the Audit Committee, which acts on behalf of the bank shareholders. Ultimately, the board has to make the shareholders happy—and the customers, of course. The bank's here to serve the customers. It's their money, after all. Without customers there wouldn't be much of a bank, now, would there?" Mr. Murphy laughed. "So who's in charge? Good question! With an institution this big, it's hard to say. Sometimes it's like it has a life of its own, and we're all just trying to hold on." He laughed again, grabbing his briefcase on the way out the door.

She had a hard time making sense of all that. The CEO seemed most like a king, but Mr. Murphy had made it sound like the customers were in charge, since it was their money after all. But she had seen the customers and it didn't seem like they were in charge. Sometimes they looked sad or angry and no one seemed to pay much attention to that. And some looked nervous. Usually those were asking where the loan office was. But mostly they were just normal, not-nervous, working people like her—she had even thought of getting a bank account herself. Then *she* would be a customer. But she didn't think that would mean she was in charge.

Most of the tellers and office workers were gone now. Only a few cleaning people left. And the security guards, who stayed all night. She got out the vacuum cleaner.

What had Mr. Murphy said about "a life of its own"? The bank had a life of its own? What did he mean by that? She

wasn't sure. But it made her think of something she'd seen her first day here.

It was a video for new employees. The last part of the video was called "Team Spirit." Everyone in the video was smiling during that part, she'd noticed, but seeing "team spirit" again made her feel a little nervous. She remembered the "team spirit" rallies they used to have in her high school, every Friday afternoon. Those had made her *very* nervous. She hadn't known what the team spirit was—except that it caused the kids to go crazy on Fridays. She'd wondered if it could be what made some of the athletes and cheerleaders so mean. Now she wondered if "the life of its own" was the team spirit. Here.

This stopped her in the middle of the long carpet, her skin crawling. She glanced nervously around the large, empty lobby. All by herself. Alone. Then she saw a security guard and he smiled and she felt a little better.

She finished the vacuuming, trying not to think about a spirit in the bank, trying to act normal. Now most of all she needed to act normal, if she wanted to keep working here. But did she? Of course she did. She didn't know if there was a spirit at all. Probably there wasn't. Even though it said that in the video and Mr. Murphy said "life of its own." No—this was a nice place. She liked working here. Especially the last part of her job, going around turning off all the lights. It was so cool and quiet and dark then. It always made her think of the church she went to as a child. Yes, nice. She didn't want to have to leave the bank. But what could she do to stay?

She switched off the lobby lights and it felt like church. She gazed at the carved pillars and polished stone floor. And the open, high-ceilinged lobby, where people gathered not just on Sunday but every day, and spoke softly and were polite. Respectful. Then suddenly she understood why.

The spirit. Who protected all their money. Who could give them what they needed. The *spirit* was the one in charge. The

thought made the back of her neck tingle.

Then she turned around and there it was. Huge. The golden eye. Lit so it gleamed at her, with its beams shooting out in every direction. She stared at it from the shadows and couldn't move. Then, bathed in the golden glow, she knelt. And slowly her hands came up, palms pressed together, fingertips almost touching her chin. Her eyes on the eye.

Silence. Cool stillness. Then her whisper. "Sovereign?"

"Are you there?"

She waited, listening, her knees growing cold on the polished stone.

Then she heard a small creak. The golden eye seemed to tremble. Her breath stopped, her eyes growing wide.

Suddenly the light behind the eye flickered and went out, the eye itself tilted, and dropped. It hit the floor with a hollow crunch, sending little pieces of broken plastic into her lap.

For a moment she didn't move. Then she stumbled to her feet, glanced nervously towards the security guard to see if he had heard, and went to find a broom and dustpan.

ransom

The room was completely dark and he was terrified. And alone—though there were others in the room with him. The man and the woman were whispering in the blackness. The deep male voice said not to worry, they'd get out of this, as long as neither of them panicked. The female voice wasn't so sure. The deep voice said the people who kidnapped them must want something, which meant they needed them alive. "They need *you* alive, maybe," the higher voice cried, "not *me*—why did they take *me*?" The woman's voice broke into a sob. Neither of them had said a word to him. Fear and utter darkness isolated him from them. But he shared the woman's question: Why did they take *me*?

Those two had been together; he wasn't with them. They looked like lawyers or something; he looked like what he was: a homeless bum. He just happened to be standing there when it happened. Again he saw the long, black limo pull up to the curb, the door flying open, and the men in suits grabbing the man and woman. He froze. It all happened so fast there was nothing he could do—except watch. But then they saw that he saw. He heard "Grab him too," but couldn't move, then they had him in the limo too and it was moving again. The man tried to protest, he seemed to be some kind of executive or rich guy who's used to being in charge. But all the suits said was, "Daddy wants to see you."

Now the female voice was crying openly. The man's voice said, "We'll get out of this, it'll be *OK*," then, a moment later, with less patience, "we just need to be calm and *think*." Another sob. "Or at least shut up and let *me* think," the deep voice growled.

"*No!*" the high voice shouted back, "I'll cry if I want! This

is a horrible, insane situation and I shouldn't even *be* here. Whoever *Daddy* is, I'm sure he doesn't want to see *me*. This isn't my *fault* and I shouldn't *be* here!"

The shock of the light coming on was enough, but at the same moment the door squealed open. The suits entered and the door slammed. The man and the woman were frozen where they stood. And with them, from his place on the floor in the corner, with his knees pulled up under his chin, he stared at their captors in terror.

Both of the black-suited men were very large, muscled, and handsome, but one had thick curly hair and long sideburns. The other was completely bald. Each had an ear plug in one ear, with a wire running down into their collar. The hairless one pointed at the executive, commanding him to "Stand here," and indicating a spot on the floor directly in front of a video camera in the upper corner of the room. The executive hesitated, but obeyed. Then the bald man spoke.

"You've had quite a successful life, Walter. A comfortable life. But you haven't made Daddy very happy. You've made a lot of money at Daddy's expense, haven't you?"

"What do you mean? I have no idea what you're talking about." But the rich man was sweating through his expensive jacket.

"Yes you do, Walter. You know exactly what we mean. And now it's time to pay. So, how much do you think your life is worth?" The man with the curly hair pulled out a heavy, black pistol.

"Ransom? Is that what this is about?" The executive almost looked relieved. Then he started talking about money and seemed to relax, like he was back in his natural environment. But Daddy wasn't satisfied with a million. Or two million. Even when the executive worked his way up to 7.7 million, it wasn't enough, though the man swore to God it was all he had.

"You think that's all you're worth, Walter?" said the hairless man. "Daddy thinks you're worth a *lot* more." The man with curly hair raised the pistol and aimed.

"I'd have more but a lot is tied up in my charity. I could turn that over to you—it'll do *wonders* for your public image. Or you could take control of my whole *company*!" The rich man was starting to sound frantic.

"Your *company*, Walter?"

"*All* my companies! And I have *influence*, I have friends in high places who can make things happen for you. Isn't that worth something?"

The bald man shook his head. "Not to Daddy."

"I can work *for* him! I'm good at what I do—and I've got the money and power to get things done." The executive implored the camera now. "I'll work for you for the rest of my *life*!"

"Your life is over, Walter." Then a shot. The curly-haired man had finally spoken.

The rich man's body was dragged out, and the two men returned. Then the bald man pointed at the woman. As she stepped in front of the camera, she was weeping, but without making a sound. He noticed he was shaking where he sat, but he couldn't stop himself. And he couldn't look at either of the large men.

He just stared at the woman, even when the bald man spoke. "So, Susan, how much do you think *your* life is worth?"

She sobbed violently. "No," she whispered, "this can't be happening. I don't know anything about this."

"But Daddy knows about you, Susan."

"Who's *Daddy*?" she shrieked. "I don't *know* anything. I'm not in on it! I'm just a *secretary*! I *worked* for him, that's *all*."

"This isn't about him. This is about you, Susan, as you know perfectly well. Daddy is disappointed with *you*."

She stared at the bald man, speechless.

"You've had quite a comfortable life of your own, Susan. You did what you were told, you were a responsible citizen, and so you were well taken care of, weren't you? Some might even say you got *more* than your fair share..."

"Just a secretary," she sobbed.

"Yes, Susan, just a secretary. So how much? How much for your 'secretary' life?"

When she finally answered, he heard despair in her voice. "I don't know. We have some savings. My husband would give anything. Oh God, this is insane. *Insane*. This can't be happening. I didn't do anything wrong... just what I was told." She was losing it; rambling. "I shouldn't be here... didn't *do* anything... oh God. My life isn't worth *anything* to you! Can't you just let me go? Please..." Her voice fell to a whimper. "Let me go..."

"Yes, you may go." He jerked at the sound of the shot, and saw her fall.

He must have passed out then, because the next thing he knew the curly-haired man was lifting him to his feet. For a minute he was shaky and disoriented. Then he was standing alone in front of the camera.

"I wasn't with them," he croaked.

"We know," said the bald man. "Daddy wanted to see you as well. You have not gone unnoticed."

"But I'm just a bum! I just happened to be standing there!"

"You weren't always a bum, were you?" the bald man asked. "So take your pick. You can tell us what you think your life was worth then—or now."

How? How could they possibly know? Nothing about this made sense. The room swayed; he thought he was going to pass out again.

Then, like a slap, the bald man's voice brought him back. "How much?"

He faltered. "I have nothing. I... I *had* a life, a wife, children... But not any more. I loved them but... I couldn't help myself. I lost it all. No... *wasted* it—took what should have been theirs and wasted it all. Then ran. That was the best I could do for them."

"That's very disappointing."

"It was worse for me than them, I'm sure. They were better off without me—and my life *ended* on that day. But I was dying for years after that. Dying day after day after day, until... But I guess it's all over now."

"We asked you how *much*."

He looked at the bald man, then at the camera, then at the floor. He wanted to cry, but he couldn't. Finally, he said softly, "Now... to *me*... it's not worth anything."

He heard the curly-haired man raising the gun. Suddenly he fell to his knees and looked up at the camera. "But please let me live."

The gun remained raised, and the man who held it spoke. "Daddy wants you to tell him why."

Now the tears came. He pressed his hands to his face and the tears ran through his fingers and streamed down his arms. They splashed and gathered on the floor in front of him. Then, slowly, he bowed his head. Lower and lower. Until his forehead touched the puddle of tears. Then he answered. The words bubbled through his lips and were muffled by his hands, but he only had to say them once. "I'm sorry. For *all* of it. But... somewhere in my dying... in my dying—I *changed*. Now I just want *life*. That's all. Just another chance at life."

Then he was being lifted. His vision was bleary and he felt terribly weak, but he was upright. Then the door flew open. And there was light, incredible light. So bright he could *feel* it. But he didn't cringe or turn away. The light seemed to be calling him, and he stepped toward it. And all at once he

understood that the light was life, and that he was no longer alone.

And he knew that the one who was calling him was Daddy. *His* Daddy. He stepped through the door.

angel

"He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it..." The rhythmic voice pressed into her head, then droned on, buzzing in the cloud that surrounded her. And slowly the darkness lifted. Light crept through the haze, spreading with a pinkish glow, and then her eyes opened to life again.

As her vision found its focus she saw the shape of a woman, her face averted. Then the woman suddenly turned, looked right at her, and smiled warmly. The droning voice clicked off. The woman's voice was softer and richer. "Hello, honey. My name is Maria..."

She was in a hospital room, attached to beeping monitors and tubes poked into her arms. She did not remember how she had gotten here. She did not remember what had happened to her. The woman, Maria, told her that she had been in a fire, that she had saved Maria's daughter and had come back for Maria but was unable to free her and was knocked out when part of the ceiling fell on them. She had been fearless, the woman said. A hero. Firefighters had arrived in time to pull her and Maria out of the house, but they had a hard time reviving her. Maria had been praying for her life.

She tried to speak, croaking "I...", then stopped, surprised at the strange sound of her own voice. The older woman nodded, waiting. "Who...", she began again, then faltered, her voice dropping to a whisper, "do you know my name?"

Christie. Maria told her she overheard the paramedics asking many questions when they got her breathing again, to make sure her brain was okay, but she had only answered, "Christie, Christie." She didn't remember that name. But when the orderly came and Maria had to leave, she saw it. The

orderly removed her shirt to bathe her, and there on her arms were dark tattoos. On one arm a rose etched in red, drawn with blood dripping from the petals. And the other arm was wrapped with a band of thorny vines woven together, with elaborate lettering above and below: *Domine Iesu Christe miserere mei peccatricis*. She didn't understand the words. But she saw the name.

After her bath, she slept. When she awoke, Maria was there again. This time the older woman spoke of herself and her daughter. They were leaving soon, moving far away to live near Maria's relatives, where they would be safe. Maria was sure that the fire had been set by her ex-husband, and she wasn't going to give him another chance. They had nothing left here anyway.

"Where do you live, dear?"

She couldn't answer. She didn't know where she lived, or even if she had a family looking for her. It was a horrible feeling, as if she had been thrust into a place where she didn't belong... yet in some unknown way, she did. She needed a connection badly, a connection to her lost life. Something Maria couldn't give. Something the hospital couldn't give, either. The orderly had told her they had no identification for her, assuring her, though, that the memory almost always came back in time.

"I don't know." It was all she could say to Maria, her voice trembling.

"Oh honey, I'm sorry. Don't worry about that. I'm sure that will be taken care of. Someone's looking for you right now, you can be sure of that." Maria took her hand. "And you're always welcome with us, any time, for as long as you need. It's just me and my girl now. And we owe our lives to you." The older woman's eyes were wet. She began to look through her purse. "We're not leaving for a week, if I'm not here call me, for anything... you could even go with us. You're family now."

Maria gave her a slip of paper with a phone number on it. "But I'm sure someone will come for you soon."

The days that followed were a blur of nurses and tests and no new information. She felt stronger and grew impatient with nothing to do but sleep and watch television. Her muscles itched to be used. And the hospital had no answers for her—no one had come for her. Maria was faithful, even bringing her daughter a few times, and she liked them both. Missed them when they weren't there. But she felt an increasingly urgent need to know more, to find her connection, her real life.

Then, the day after Maria brought her some clothes, she just got up and walked out of the hospital. The sunshine felt good. But she didn't know where she was going; she just followed the main street, hoping something would look familiar.

She hadn't walked five blocks when someone approached her. "Ange... Hey, Ange!" She didn't recognize the rough-looking woman, who was definitely talking to her. "Angel! Girl, where you been?" She didn't know how to respond. "And what you doin' out here? You gotta lay low, I thought thas what you were doin'. They's lookin' for you."

She finally found her voice. "Who?"

The young woman stared at her, unbelieving. "Whatchoo mean who? You knifed their girl. She dead now. So now they want *you* dead." The woman looked around, then pulled her off the street into an alley. "But don' worry, we got you covered. There's a place you can go, jus' let me get holda K and we'll get you there. They won' be able to touch you."

She stepped back from the woman. "I don't know... I don't remember...."

The woman had her phone out, making a call. "I got her. Yeah. Yeah, I know where it is. Okay."

She took another step back, looking to see if anyone was nearby, and said again "I don't know...."

"Angel, trust me. You gotta do this. I ever let you down before? C'mon."

But when the woman took her arm, she pulled away. "Wait... hold on... who... I don't know you."

That stopped the woman, her face darkening. "Angel, quit that shit. You known me since forever. I know you scared, but you gotta trust me." When she showed no sign of moving, the woman took a step closer, lowering her voice. "I took care a you when your momma flipped and killed your brother an' herself, and I'll take care a you now. We the only family you got. So c'mon, we gotta get outta here."

Her brother. Crying. Something stirred in the dark place inside her head. Slight at first, then rushing over her, pulling her in, gathering intensity until she thought she might throw up. She staggered a little, and the woman grabbed her. The grip was firm and sure. She felt power in the hands that held her, a fierce power in the gaze that urged her to follow. *The only family you got. Momma flipped. You knifed their girl. She dead now. Your brother an' herself. Only family you got. Angel.*

"Angel... Angel!"

She looked into the eyes of someone who knew her, who was holding her up, who would protect her. Her friend. Her sister. Who knew her. "We gotta go. Now!" She felt like she was falling as they started to move, out of the alley and down the street. She stumbled, but the strong hand kept her upright and moving. They were falling together.

The cars and people and storefronts flashed by them, indistinct, a wash of color. They fell faster. Then a sudden cry startled her and she tripped hard and hit the pavement.

When she looked up there was a child. A young girl, with tears in her eyes, her mother bent over her. Lifting her and gently brushing the dirt from her dress. "It's okay, honey. See? Good as new." The girl wiped the tears, then for a moment their eyes met.

"Ange, c'mon!"

She was lifted from the pavement by the strong arms, but then she didn't move. And this time she answered the fierce gaze with a shake of her head. "You got the wrong..." She pulled away from the insistent grip. "I'm not Angel." She turned and started the other way, ignoring the shouts.

Within a block, Christie found a pay phone. She pulled the slip of paper from her pocket.

high school

First it was Steve Pomeroy—now Mike Miller. And this is just the first year. I don't know if I can take this, Lord. I'm used to being called nerd, geek, the notes shoved in my locker, the wads of paper hitting the back of my neck in class. That doesn't bother me so much any more. But these guys don't stop at words. They get physical. It's starting to scare me, God.

Dad keeps saying Mike must be lonely. That his parents don't pay enough attention to him, so he's "acting out." So I'm not supposed to hate him, but try to "identify with him," try to be his friend. But he doesn't know Mike, Lord. You know what he's like. He doesn't want me as a friend. He has friends. If he made friends with someone like me, his friends would be all over him. He's not trying to get my attention like some little kid on the playground. He spit in my face. Oh, God...

Mom wanted to call the principal. I told her no, but she said the only way to stop this was to tell someone who could do something. But I tried that before, with Steve Pomeroy. They sent me to the vice principal, who said he would talk to the coach right away—but I didn't want him involved, Lord! But the vice principal just kept saying "that's the way it works." Coach must have said something to Steve, because he changed. Yeah—he got better. He'd only go at me when no one else was around, or do stuff I couldn't prove was him. And I could tell people looked down on me even more after that. A whiner. I know they thought I should've done something myself. Fought back. At least tried to stand up for myself. I don't think I could

then... but now... When Mike hit me in the back yesterday, it happened so fast and I was so pissed I almost did it, Lord. I know it's not right, not what you want, but I almost did. I could have.

His cheek was pressed hard into the cool steel of the lockers. It hurt. But his arm hurt more, where he had fallen on it. And Mike's breath was right in his ear, nasty, drilling in with practiced skill, but filthy, hating. And why? *Why?* He never did anything to Mike. Why the hell... ah... ow-OW! *SONuva...* Thought stopped. His whole body tensed to lash out...

"Hey!"

Mike froze. It was Steve's voice. "Hey, what have... we... *here?* You two having a little lover's spat—or are you collecting lunch money, Miller?" Laughter. There were four of them, all football players. They were coming closer. "Guess we should come to the rescue. That would be the *right* thing to do... You know, Miller, if you want a workout, why mess with little geeks like him? We'd give you a much better work..." Suddenly Mike released him, and he hit the hard tile. There was a struggle above him. *Thank you God, thank you.* Blows. Mike was grunting in pain. Coughing. Somebody laughed. He started to get up.

"Hey! You want a shot? This is your chance..." He looked up—they were all looking at him. They wanted him to hit Mike too. He didn't move.

"Don't worry kid, he can't hurt you now... look at him." A dark bruise was already forming under Mike's left eye, but the eye rolled up and fixed on him. And he saw the wet, crimson lips saying, "Do it. *I dare...*"

Mike got hit in the stomach. "Don't be afraid. If he tries to

get back at you we'll mess him up again. This is your *chance*, kid!"

He looked at Steve. Then at Mike. Then at Steve. And turned and slowly started down the wide hallway. *Thank you...*

"Oh, you *pussy!*"

Steve. And someone else let out one short laugh. The laugh cut him more.

He was right in my face and called me a fucking coward, Lord. All alone in the bathroom and he was right in my face. "...a fucking coward—or you thought you were having mercy on me! If you think I need your mercy you're one stupid piece of shit. Nobody needs your mercy. You should have done it when you had the chance. Because I'm going to make you pay anyway—you know that, don't you? You're at my mercy now..." Someone came in, but I know that's not going to stop him for long, Lord. A coward. Or a piece of shit. Lord, I know I'm not that. I know. But they keep saying the same thing. They keep coming, one after another, and they keep saying it, Lord. And they don't stop at words...

holy fool

Climbing the winding stone steps that rose into the pulpit, he felt a peace come over him. As it almost always did. The pulpit was a secure place, solidly clinging to the huge pillar, raised above the crowd, wrapping close around him. And the elevation, along with the ornate carvings and the focused lighting, reinforced the authority of the words he spoke there. God's words. He held up the large, gilded book for all to see, then opened it and read. His voice, amplified, filled the grand old church, rising with emotion as he concluded. "...God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." The words echoed and disappeared, leaving a powerful stillness. But then another voice piped up, from almost directly below the pulpit.

"Amen, brother! Preach it!"

An amused murmur rose from the people, and he smiled generously. Once in a while there were strange moments like this. Last week, a tall, gangly fellow had stepped into the aisle during the prayers and sprawled out face down on the stone floor. But the congregation was very understanding. There was a psychiatric care halfway house not far from the church, and people from there often showed up for services. Some of them regularly. So occasionally there were minor disturbances, but he'd learned to just smile and carry on, as he did now. Their presence added a little color to the church, he thought. And didn't Jesus try to be friendly with social misfits like these?

Two weeks later there was another incident, involving a man he had never seen there before. Probably a new resident at the halfway house. It was in the second or third row, right in the middle of his sermon; all of a sudden the man's head lolled back and snoring was heard. At first this was ignored. And he had continued to preach, just raising his voice a little and watching the scene out of the corner of his eye. But then the snoring got louder and people started looking and there were some laughs, so an usher approached the man. The sleeping eyes popped open and stared at the usher. Then a gruff voice. "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath!" The volume of this proclamation, and the laughter that warmly welcomed it, sent the usher scurrying away.

It had been difficult enough to get back into the flow of his message after that; but the next week was even worse. The man—who he later found out was named John—showed up again, and again sat up front. This time, however, John did not fall asleep but listened intently. Throughout the sermon John stared at him. And there were no interruptions as he preached eloquently on the building block of society, the family, ordained by God as the fundamental human community. He finished with an Amen as usual, closed the large bible, and turned to descend the steps. That's when John spoke up.

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" John cried out. And spread both arms wide. "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother—amen, preacher?"

He hesitated. So John answered himself, "Amen!" Then wrapped an arm around the person sitting on either side—a young man to the left and an elderly woman to the right—and gave each a loud, smacking kiss on the cheek. "Amen!"

That scene inspired him to preach about peace the next Sunday. Specifically the passage that concludes, "For God is not a God of confusion, but of peace." About orderliness in

worship. But he didn't limit himself to that; he also spoke about how Christians can spread their peace throughout the wider society. How Christians can be a calming influence in a world full of conflict. This time John listened without any outbursts. He was relieved. Perhaps his message had touched something deep in the man's troubled psyche. As he stepped from the pulpit, he thought he recognized a quiet, thoughtful look on John's face.

But when an usher approached to collect the offering, John suddenly jumped up and grabbed the usher's long pole with a basket on the end. Then leapt into the aisle, shouting. "Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth—I have not come to bring peace, but a sword!" And immediately John began swinging the pole-and-basket with both hands, like a longsword. A woman shrieked. The rest of the people were frozen. Then two ushers rushed over, and John took a wide swing at them. There were several dodges and lunges. Then the madman was subdued. From behind the altar, as he watched them drag John away down the aisle, he was pretty sure he heard John say, "Yeah—this is more like it!"

The following Sunday, he stationed an usher at each church entrance. If John returned, they were to tell him that those who did not respect the other worshipers' here were not welcome. But none of the ushers saw the man. And John's face was not among those in the first few rows. He climbed into the pulpit with the familiar sense of peace.

But he didn't even make it through the scripture reading. A loud slam silenced him and he jerked up to see the front doors flying open and John lunging through. The man was surprisingly fast. And completely naked. Streaking up the aisle, John wailed, "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return!" Then the nude man was standing up front, by the altar, with eyes closed and both arms raised. "Blessed be the name of the Lord!"

He could take no more. He shouted from his perch in the pulpit, his angry voice booming through the church. "A God of peace, not confusion!"

John opened his eyes. Looked at him. Then smiled serenely and spread both arms wide. "Who's more at peace than this?"

As John strode towards the door, none of the ushers tried to grab the naked man. And no one made a sound. So even from way up in the pulpit he heard John say to a woman in the last row, "The kingdom of God has come near to you!" And with a laugh, the fool was gone.

song of songs

"Oh that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth!
For your love is better than wine..."

She looked up at the shiny black box at the front of the church, and noticed the silence. Not even a whisper. It made the shabby little church seem even more depressing than usual. She'd been coming here with her parents since she was a little girl, more reluctantly each year, and she knew every inch of every pew and every face. All these people who had come to pay their respects to her grandmother were exactly the same ones she saw on Sunday. Sunday after Sunday. And she was sure the pastor's words would sound exactly the same as they did every time he got up behind the pulpit. She'd heard them too many times to pay attention for long. So before the service even began she'd reached for the bible in the rack in front of her and flipped to her favorite book. "My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh, that lies between my breasts... Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely."

She didn't have a boyfriend yet, but there was someone she liked and she thought he liked her too. And this time she was going to do something about it. She and her friends had been telling each other about their crushes for years. But it usually never amounted to more than whispers and crumpled notes and a lot of embarrassed giggling. She was tired of that. She wanted more than daydreams and empty talk. She wanted to know what a real relationship was like.

The pastor interrupted the silence and she looked up. The usual funeral words. The usual songs about heaven. She wasn't sure if she believed in heaven; it sounded a little too good to be true—at least it seemed unlikely that all the people they *said* were going there actually were. She hoped her grandma was at

peace, though. She hadn't known her very well, but her grandmother had been a nice lady. And a good cook.

She realized she was hungry, and as she scanned the lines of poetry in her lap, images of honey and milk and fruit appeared again and again. This part was her favorite: "How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, delectable maiden! You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches. Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your kisses like the best wine that goes down smoothly, gliding over lips and teeth. I am my beloved's and his desire is for me. Come my beloved, let us go forth into the fields..." Yes, she wanted a *real* relationship, not a daydream. Someone who was really hers and she was really his and they would go out to face the world together.

"Margaret was an inspiration and model for us all. I could always count on her smile from the third row, right over here, and she always showed up for the women's bible studies and prayer breakfasts. She helped organize the church potluck every month..." Grandma *had* spent a lot of time at church after Grandpa died. The thought made her kind of sad. "... because Margaret loved her Lord. That's what made her such a faithful servant in this church, doing the Lord's work. She was the first one here every Sunday, making sure the doors were open and there were fresh flowers on the altar." She looked down again and read, "If I met you outside, I would kiss you, and none would despise me..." "We're glad Margaret is in a better place now, but this church will miss her. We'll all miss her. And I'm sure she'll miss us too; this church was her home. Now if any of Margaret's friends or family would like to say a word..."

"Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?" She looked up from the page as her Aunt Helen strode up the aisle. Helen lived in some big city down south

and they didn't see her often. There seemed to be something vaguely scandalous about her aunt, at least that's the feeling she picked up from her parents.

"I wasn't planning to say anything," Aunt Helen began, "but I get the distinct feeling that my mom's not missing this place much right now." A long pause, as if she wasn't sure what to say next, then Helen spoke again. "I believe she did love Jesus. Or at least she longed for him in her heart; I could see that. She just never knew what to do with that longing. I suppose she was a little afraid of it. Now maybe Mom finally has the kind of love, the kind of life, she could have had all along. Not bible studies and potlucks and tending this old church, but a life walking next to Jesus."

Suddenly a memory rose up. She was small. Her mother and Aunt Helen were in the next room arguing. Helen was leaving. And her mother wanted to know "why do you want to throw your life away" and "how are you going to survive in a place like that." And she remembered Helen's voice, so soft she could barely hear it: "Because that's where Jesus is."

"It's like he said, 'Where I am, there my servant will be also,'" Aunt Helen continued, the words tumbling out faster, and it somehow didn't feel like a funeral anymore. "And we know where he was and what he was doing during his lifetime... I mean, among the poor, preaching good news to them, and suffering at the hands of the rich and powerful. He's still doing that now." Then, softer, her eyes shining, "Do we really love him? Do we love him enough to want to be *with* him?" Helen seemed to run out of breath and her eyes fell to the casket, then she stepped away from the pulpit and returned quietly to her seat. The only sound was the creaking of the pews as bodies shifted uncomfortably.

"Amen," the pastor said with a smile. "Thank you for that sharing... uh... " *Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?* "Is there anyone else..."

She glanced over at Helen, who smiled at her with flushed cheeks.

the womb

She sat down heavily on the bed, holding the plastic wand in front of her, staring at it. These things weren't always accurate, she reminded herself. But her body also was telling her that something new was happening, the beginning of something that was so small, barely noticeable now, but something that would soon be very big. Bigger than she could contain. Bigger than herself even, much bigger. She fell back and laid there feeling horribly small and weak.

It seemed like she laid that way for hours, not wanting to look at the clock and see how late it was and he still wasn't home. But she knew it was time to get up and take off her clothes and crawl into bed again. It was the second night in a row she would go to sleep without her husband beside her. But, in a way, she was relieved he wasn't there. She couldn't bear to tell him what the pregnancy test had told her.

Losing his job had been hard enough, and with the economy the way it was there was no telling when he'd find another one. The idleness was tormenting him. And if it wasn't for her working, they would be in serious financial trouble as well. But he hadn't stayed out late drinking until she'd told him what her boss had said.

Maybe she shouldn't have. But she'd needed to tell someone, and it certainly affected him as well and he had a right to know. She'd also hoped a male perspective might help her figure it out. It wasn't the stereotypical case of sexual harassment. She had worked for Carl for years; she thought of him as a friend—and even after what he said she didn't hate or fear him so much as despise his weakness. He loved her, that's what he said. He'd always loved her. But now Carl's wife had found out how he felt and was demanding that he "get rid of

the temptation." What could he do, he'd begged. He didn't want to lose his wife, who was adamant that she be immediately transferred or let go, and there just wasn't anywhere to transfer her. He said it would be easier for her to get another job if she quit rather than being fired. But she knew it would also be easier for *him* that way. Apparently Carl hadn't considered quitting himself—but she really didn't want him to lose his job either, did she? He was so pitiful in his helplessness. But his helplessness was crushing her. Especially coming right now, when John was out of a job. John's first reaction was to say *he'd* crush *Carl* with his own hands, then he'd wanted to call a lawyer and see if there was a case against the company. It had taken hours of arguing before he'd agreed to let her handle it.

And she still thought this was important, though she wasn't sure yet what she would do, what she *could* do. She didn't feel right about litigation. Or going over Carl's head. She didn't like to treat people that way, especially friends—even former friends. But now, with a child coming... it was like circumstances were closing in on her. Leaving her no options. And with John acting angry and hurt and vengeful, she felt more alone than ever. She could imagine his feelings of impotence: His inability to provide, and now her rejection of his attempts to protect her. But this was her job, her relationships, her situation, pressing *her* for a response. And she was in the best position to see and understand all that was involved and what the implications might be. Unfortunately, this also meant she saw clearer than anyone else the impossibility of her situation. God, what had she done to deserve this? She crawled under the covers and pulled herself into a ball. John still wasn't home.

Then she felt a strange stirring in the darkness. Movement. Something was happening. She tried to turn and look but the warm dark was close around her, and now it seemed to be pressing. She tried to push back. But she couldn't even make

room to move and then everything around her was up against her fragile body, crushing her. The violence of the assault shocked her. She panicked. Then the pressure suddenly released, but her heart continued to race. What was *that*? She'd never experienced anything like it before. It was like reality itself was attacking her.

Silence, except for the pounding of her heart. Then movement again in the dark. And immediately her body was powerfully gripped and squeezed a second time, her head jammed against something hard so quickly and forcefully that she thought her neck might break. Then the crushing force was gone. She squirmed, trying to escape, but couldn't. She was held. She remembered being held in safety and comfort, as in a warm embrace, but now she felt held in a prison—all alone in a prison where the walls were caving in. Again the incredible pressure fell on her. Again and again, each time more violently and with shorter breaks in between. Until she no longer was expecting them to end. She was just bracing for the one that would crush the life out of her. Then it came. The thrust was so hard it compressed her skull, squeezing her brain, and then the dark wasn't just around her but behind her eyes and she let it rush over her and just went limp. Oh *God*...

And suddenly everything was light. And she could see. She'd been born.

Her last memory as she awoke was of her lying at her mother's soft, warm breast, listening to the steady heartbeat that had comforted her in the womb. That and the priest. She shut off the alarm clock. She remembered the priest because that was the strangest part of her dream. The priest from her church was in the delivery room for some reason; she recognized his deep, sonorous voice as he was reading, repeating... what was it? "*In Him we live and move and have our being.*" Over and over.

She laid there for a while then slid out of bed, being careful not to wake John. He was snoring softly. She watched him for several minutes before going to get dressed for work. She wondered what he would say tonight.

"That's not love, Carl," she said, standing directly in front of his large desk. "That's not what love *does*. Love might make you give up *your* job, or maybe stand up to your wife. But love doesn't tell me I have to choose between quitting and getting fired. That has nothing to do with love." He didn't argue; she waited, but he didn't say anything at all. He couldn't even look at her. "I'm not going to quit. And if you fire me, I'm not going to sue or complain to anyone. Even you." Again she was tempted to mention John's unemployment and the child that was coming—then reminded herself why she was here. She wasn't here to beg. "I'm just going to tell you right now that it's wrong. Please don't do it. I'm not saying that for myself; I'm saying it for you. If you do this I know you'll regret it. Please don't." OK, maybe she *was* here to beg. "Carl," she said gently, and he looked up. "You don't *have* to do this. I know it seems to you like your only option, but there has to be another way. And I'll help if you let me. Because I do love *you*, Carl. *And* your wife. That's how I know this isn't the only way—because it's not love." She looked deep into his helpless eyes, trying to reach something. "I'm asking you to love, Carl."

As she turned and started for the door, the dark rushed in on her again, pressing. John's weakness, Carl's weakness, her child's weakness, her own weakness rushed over her, darkness behind her eyes, and the door seemed to be getting smaller and smaller. But an incredible force was behind her, pushing. She let it. And suddenly the door was opening and she was through.

And everything was light.

family

She wondered why her wheelchair wouldn't move back from the table, then she looked down and saw the wheels were locked. The table was bright with colors and candles, turkey and cranberries, but she'd had enough. Too much noise. She liked to watch the little girl making faces and hear her laughter. But the man was *still* talking about football with the older boy, so loudly that she couldn't ignore them. "...into overtime. Hey, any more stuffing, Mary?"

"Yes, just a minute." The woman turned to her, and spoke louder. "I cooked the turkey upside down to keep the white meat juicy, just like you taught me, Mom. Remember that?"

She turned and nodded and smiled, but she didn't remember cooking a turkey that way.

"And I made the sweet potatoes the way you always did, too. With brown sugar and pecans, not marshmallows. That's become a family tradition, Mom."

Pecans? What was she talking about?

The tradition I remember, Isabel, is that you would always come over if I didn't make it to church. If I was sick, or the sidewalks were too icy, you would always show up smiling. You would read the passages they read in church, and then we would talk about them. And have some tea maybe...

"And of course *everyone* goes shopping tomorrow. Remember how you always used to take me? Would you like to go to the mall tomorrow, Mom? I don't want to miss the sales, and I could help you buy things for Christmas. The kids gave me *plenty* of ideas..." The woman looked at the children and the girl giggled.

Of course I was a little shocked when you started inviting those neighborhood boys into your apartment, Isabel. They weren't big, but they were so... raggedy-looking. And rough—and you were just a young woman. And you kept it up, even when they stole from you. That worried me quite a bit. I wasn't surprised when the other tenants started talking about you, Isabel, and not in a nice way. What surprised me was that you kept doing it, even after I warned you. But I didn't go along with them when they were trying to kick you out. That went too far. That's when I came over and had lunch with some of the boys at your place. They weren't such bad boys. They didn't know how to sit still, or mind their language when a lady was present, but they seemed softer when they were at your table, Isabel. It even made me think that was the kind of place where Jesus would be. I was so sorry when they made you move. But really more sorry for those boys, and me...

"I heard John quit his job and is going back to school, Mom. Your nephew John, who lives in Colorado, you remember. Ann's son. Your sister, Ann?"

She nodded, but...

"Oh, and have you heard Helen's big news?"

I didn't hear right away that you'd been killed, Isabel. When you didn't show up that snowy day after I missed church, I wondered, but I never imagined it was that. I guess I just thought God would always keep you safe, even if you did keep inviting in people like that, sticking your neck out that way. Because you were just such a good girl, Isabel. God had to be watching you close. When I heard, I couldn't believe it. Murdered. I cried for a long time, cried and prayed harder than I ever did before...

"The Detroit game's coming on—is everyone as stuffed as I am? So who you bettin' on, Billy-boy?"

"Maybe we should just go to Marshall-Field's, Mom, so we don't have to walk around so much. How does that sound?"

Who are these people, Isabel? I don't think I belong here. And I'm tired, Isabel... so tired...

"Momma, Gramma's got her eyes closed... Mom!"

"Shh, honey, let your grandma rest."

"That's the tryptophan kickin' in! Heh heh..."

"Billy, hush!"

"But Momma, I tapped her arm and she didn't wake up."

"That's OK, I think she's done. Here, take this into the kitchen."

No, not yet, Isabel. We have to wait a little longer...

"Gramma's awake!" Then softer, closer, "Gramma? You said Isabel. Who's Isabel?"

She looked at the little girl thoughtfully. "Isabel..." she began, then cleared her throat and smiled. "Isabel was like a daughter to me... and a mother.... When I first met her, she..."

physician, heal thyself

"I'll have a look at him," he said wearily, dropping his pen on the unfinished paperwork and getting up again. "But he's the last one today. If I don't get these reports out we could lose our funding."

The nurse looked relieved. "Thank you, doctor."

The patient was in a wheelchair; he'd seen the man here at the clinic before. Muscular dystrophy. Not much they could do about that. But he didn't understand why the man didn't at least have a power chair; Medicaid paid for things like that. Apparently his wife didn't mind pushing him around. "Hello, Mr. Johns. Kelly wants me to have a look at your leg. How long has it been like this?"

"About a week, but it's not bothering me. I'm just here to reassure my wife."

He adjusted the light and took a long look at the reddened area. "Kelly also says she thought she saw something... unusual in the waiting room just now. Between you and Mrs. Parker?" He paused. "Did you see Mrs. Parker—she's also in a wheelchair, early 50s, dark hair—did you talk to her?"

"Yes."

"Just now."

"Yes."

He eyed Mr. Johns. "What happened?"

"What did the nurse tell you?"

He hesitated, staring warily at the man in the chair. "She said Mrs. Parker got up and left."

Mr. Johns just looked at him and nodded.

He took a deep breath and leaned over the man's leg again, touching it lightly this time. "Does that hurt?"

"No. I think it's getting better; it just takes things a long time to heal, with my poor circulation."

"Yes, I don't think it's anything to worry about," he agreed. Then added, "But you must be mistaken about Mrs. Parker. She's paraplegic; she's never going to walk again. You must have her confused with someone else." He pulled down the man's pant leg and lowered the leg rest into its normal position. Then he straightened up and smiled. "Come back, though, if this gets worse."

"Yes. Thank you."

He turned to go. But the man's voice stopped him at the door. "Mrs. Parker has been coming here to Bethesda clinic for many years," Mr. Johns said slowly. "It just seemed like she'd been waiting long enough. Don't you agree?"

He turned and studied the man sitting there. "What are you suggesting? That you healed her?"

"Is that what the nurse told you?"

"That seems to be her conclusion. She's mistaken, of course..."

Mr. Johns smiled. "Of course. No, I didn't heal her, doctor." The man's gaze fell to his lap, then rose again quickly. "God did."

He shifted Mr. Johns' file to his other hand, and sighed. "Look, I don't have time for this. I've got a lot to do." He turned again to leave.

"God has also healed your daughter, doctor," Mr. Johns said. "You should go see her."

He froze, confused. Then turned back, anger rising within him. "I'm not sure what kind of game you're playing, but it's not funny."

"It's not meant to be funny," the man replied calmly. "You look tired, doctor. You should leave the rest of your work for tomorrow and go visit your daughter right now. She's waiting for you."

He stared hard at Mr. Johns, then laughed. "You can't expect me to believe any of this. I mean... I don't mean to be rude... but look at you. If you really are what you're pretending to be, why are you still sitting there in that chair?" He took two steps and looked down at his patient again. "For that matter, why not heal *all* those people out there? Why just Mrs. Parker? Do you see what I'm saying? It doesn't make any sense."

Mr. Johns considered that a moment before replying.

He managed to wait two days before going to see Sophie. To prove to himself he wasn't going because Johns told him to, but just because it had been too long since his last visit with his daughter. The psychiatric hospital depressed him. He cringed inside every time the wide door to the locked ward fell shut behind him. His daughter should not be here. And he hated to see her like this, drugged into submission; sometimes he briefly wondered if the unpredictably violent Sophie hadn't been better. At least she spoke then—as loud as she could. Now she just sat there. Looking at him.

When he entered her room she was sitting on the bed and her hair was neatly combed. Which was unusual for Sophie. Her hair had been the only remaining sign of the girl he remembered, the only part of her they had not been able to tame. But as he approached the bed he noticed the comb was in her own hand. He looked questioningly into her eyes. And saw there the usual medicated haze, but also something else—was it a light? She smiled. He stopped, staring at the girl who had once been his daughter and then was not. Then he heard her voice again.

"Daddy," she said softly, the light in her eyes flaring. "You have *got* to get me out of here. These people are control freaks!"

He made an appointment with Sophie's doctor and promised her he'd return the next day. Then she kissed him. He was so surprised, he practically ran out of the hospital. It was impossible; he wanted it too much to trust his own judgment, and how could it possibly have happened? Johns had told him how it happened. But that was ridiculous—this was a man who claimed his *disease* had made him a healer. Okay, not exactly, but isn't that what it amounted to? "The weaker I got, the more I felt it rising up in me." Which was also Johns' reason for not healing himself. And for not wanting to pack stadiums and go on TV like those famous so-called "faith healers." "My power is made perfect in weakness." So the man would rather be unknown and so poor he has to go to a free clinic to see a doctor. None of it made sense. *Johns* was the one who should be in the psychiatric hospital.

But he found himself making an unplanned stop at the clinic on the way home. To get Mrs. Parker's address. Then he drove the few blocks to her house, not knowing what he would do when he got there. He didn't have to do anything. Mrs. Parker was out in front of her house, planting some flowers. As he passed, she turned and waved. He waved back.

It was three years before he saw Mr. Johns again. Mrs. Johns pushed him in, babbling that she'd wanted to call 911 but her husband insisted on being brought to the clinic. It looked like Johns was dying. The man was so weak he could barely take a breath. His first impulse was to call 911 himself since the clinic was not equipped to handle this, but before he could move, Mr. Johns fell forward and he lunged to catch the dying man.

Then he heard one word, in a low rasp.

"Sophie?"

He looked into Mr. Johns' eyes and was caught for a

moment. Then he nodded. "Yes, she's home... I tried to find you, but your file...." He saw Mr. Johns' smile fade as the man struggled to take another breath. "No!" he whispered frantically. "Don't let this happen! Get up!" Then he stepped back from the dying man. "I can't help you. Please! Why won't you get up? I work so hard here but... I can't... But *you*, you could change it all... Get *up*!" He grabbed Mr. Johns' shoulders, and the man spoke again.

"Unless a grain... falls... and dies..."

Then the voice sounded different. "But if it dies it produces *much*..." It sounded stronger, though the blue-tinged lips didn't seem to be moving anymore. But there was life in the eyes that held his. "You think, 'If I work hard enough...' But there's too many Mrs. Parkers left waiting. And your own daughter, sitting there looking at you. And then you begin to doubt you're the man you think you are, the man they say you are... Who told you that *you're* the doctor?"

He stared at Mr. Johns for several minutes, though he was sure the man was dead. He stood up slowly. Then he was moving towards the door, someone calling after him, "Doctor? Doctor!"

"I'm not feeling well," he mumbled and pushed the door open.

The sun was bright and hot. Waves of heat danced on the pavement, forming mirages in the dead air. He looked out into the parking lot and down the street. No movement, no life. *Unless a grain falls and dies*... He took a hot breath and stepped out. But he stopped abruptly when he reached his shiny car, every surface reflecting the blazing sun. *My power is made perfect in weakness*. Taking off his stethoscope, he gently laid it on the gleaming hood, and turned towards home.

It would be a long walk, he thought.